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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the experiences of a teaching psychologist who is frustrated with the lack of resources for research at rural colleges. Rural college administrators often reject proposals for psychological research, choosing to commit their institutions purely to teaching. Because psychological laboratories are too expensive for marginally funded rural institutions, instruction too often degenerates into watching, listening, and endless trivial pursuits. Similarly, collegial relationships are often isolated, adversarial, or competitive. The paper discusses the call for a return to "psychology's empirical heritage" by working in and with problem-laden local rural communities. His suggestions include: (1) assigning research projects to student teams; (2) emphasizing the use of library skills, writing, data analysis, problem-solving, and computers; (3) fire the textbook vendors; (4) exposing students to classic psychological literature; and (5) modeling psychology's admirable traditions by reading, writing, computing, learning, and working cooperatively with colleagues. (TES)

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Teaching Psychology in a Rural College

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the experiences of one teaching-psychologist who, for twenty years, has been frustrated by scarce resources in rural colleges. His rededication to human psychology's empirical heritage may neutralize some common instructional shortcomings.

Teaching Psychology in a Rural College[1,2]

I wish to evaluate my experiences and articulate my frustrations about teaching human psychology in a rural colleges. Two decades of teaching introductory courses, from general psychology to research methods, have inflected scars, and my introspections are never painless. Madhouses have been populated with responses to lesser concerns.

Psychology's Empirical Heritage

Human psychology's hybrid development is a short story. Barely a century old, scientific psychology has already welcomed renaissance thinkers like Edward Lee Thorndike and philosophers with the mental mettle of William James and John Dewey. Psychology's family has also included talented educators.

Fortunately, human psychology continues to attract creative theoreticians like Arthur Staats, resourceful engineers like Christopher Dede, statistical innovators like Julian Stanley, and talented writers like Robert Coles or Jerome Kagan. Invited to this family feast are instructional designers like John Anderson who is coaxing CAI past digital mindlessness to artificial

intelligence and individualized instruction (e.g., Clancey & Soloway, 1990, p. 1). "The obvious goal of research on intelligent tutoring," John Anderson, et al. (1990, p. 7) claims unabashedly, "is to develop systems for automating education." Apparently, our family includes dreamers.

Human psychology, most will agree, is more than people and hopes. Our most admirable traditions link bright and motivated scholars to powerful tools, and, often, valued psychological puzzles are solved. The history of human psychology is people and content and methods.

Progress is earned through words and numbers. Together, these tools unravel entangled knots in human learning and development and mental health. Skillfully matching tools with questions is elegant, and, occasionally, empirical psychology is art.

Too often as a teacher, however, I direct my students to the south rim of the Grand Canyon, and we busy ourselves reading the US Forest Service park signs. Data about Paleozoic reptiles is ideal grist for America's multiple-choice intellectual mills. By

hanging-out at the Ranger's cabin, we defer to specialists and miss the canyon's grandiosity.

The psychology of Cattel and James and Thorndike and Skinner and Freud is more verdant than 10,000 multiple-choice items, or laserdisk entertainment for dependent undergraduates, or a five-step self-help guide to reducing your depression or your thighs or both. Psychology is greater than indoctrination, enrollments, or employment. Fundamentally, human psychology is an grand empirical endeavor.

Teacher-psychologists, regardless of their institution's size or funded prowess, are obliged to share psychology's quintessence. They need to do more than read the signs.

Rural Colleges

Empiricism in rural colleges means research, and research has inherited an ill-deserved, unpractical reputation. Deans and presidents have told me that their institution is dedicated to teaching and not research. Unfortunately for them, teaching psychology without empiricism is like baking bread without yeast.

Too much instruction in psychology in rural

America is telling, not doing. Teaching is checking-the-answer-key problem solving, not divergent creativity. Too much teaching is listening, not producing. Laboratories are too expensive for the science of psychology in marginally-funded rural colleges, and instruction degenerates into watching, listening, and endless trivial pursuits.

The instructional decline in rural colleges has many causes. Like the public schools (Barth, 1990, pp. 15-19), collegial relationships are too often isolated, adversarial, and competitive. Teacher-psychologists rarely share craft knowledge. Instead, they struggle over too few resources and are harassed by institutional psycho-babble. Marginal rural economies and geographical isolation facilitate impediments.

Rural problems are real. About mental health services, Murray and Keller (1991, p. 221) wrote, "Psychology could be defined as a largely urban profession." This rural malaise, unfortunately, flavors rural college instruction.

> Conditions in America's rural communities are far worse than is generally recognized. . . . The word

> "ghetto" speaks of the rising poverty rates, the chronic unemployment, and the recent spread of low-wage, dead-end jobs. It speaks of the relentless deterioration of health-care systems, schools, roads, buildings, and of the emergence of homelessness, hunger, and poverty. It speaks, too, of the inevitable out-migration of the best and brightest youths. (Davidson, 1990, pp. 157-158)

The economics and traditions of rural America and its pedagogy have compromised rural higher education. It is a struggle to keep human psychology's empirical quintessence alive when each teacher is isolated in a lighted box with windows and doors and chalkboard technology.

Solutions

I want to teach the psychology that I respect. So, I am going to revise my instructional style.

First, I will make my classrooms more activity-based. I will encourage small project teams to cooperatively articulate psychological problems, collect data, analyze results, and write reports.

Addressing real problems will be revealing.

Second, I will emphasize library skills, writing, data-analyses, problem-solving, computers and graphics. Can you imagine the transfer?

Third, I will fire the textbook vendors. My inspiration comes from the philosophy of a transcontinental cycler, Michael Finkel (1991): "When you travel at 10 miles per hour, the world has time to wave." I would rather have my students peddle alertly by a few major insights than have them run through eighteen verbally abstract chapters.

Fourth, I will expose my students to classic literature. A few paragraphs from Sigmund Freud's (1930) Civilization and its discontents, or Robert Coles' (1964) Children of crises, or Jerome Kagan's (1890) Unstable ideas, or William James'(1890) Principles of psychology are spring tonic to commercial publishing four-color blandness. More than tidiness and expediency, our literature has depth and surface.

Fifth, I will model psychology's admirable traditions. My students will see me reading, writing, computing, and, in a few words, learning and working

cooperatively with my colleagues on real scholastic puzzles.

Of course, it may be easier for me not to change, select a "new" textbook, and withdraw, for another nine months, from the bank of multiple choice questions.

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Footnote

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, Denver, April 27, 1991.

[2]Reprints may be obtained by writing the author: Department of Psychology, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE 69337.